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The Crisis in South Serbia

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The crisis in South Serbia, or crisis in the Preševo valley, is directly linked to the problems of the Albanian community and their human and minority rights on the one hand and border control on the other. At the same time, it includes ethnic conflict between Albanians (who are a minority in Serbia, but constitute a dominant majority in the Preševo valley) and Serbs (who are a minority in the local community, but represent the central government since they are part of the ethnic majority in Serbia). On top of everything, the complexity of this crisis is influenced by its linkages to the crises in Macedonia and Kosovo. The Preševo valley consists of the municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, which are situated on Serbia's borders with Macedonia and Kosovo. The main roads and railways, which link Europe with Macedonia and Greece through Serbia, go through this valley. There are 120,000 inhabitants in the area, out of which 70,000 are Albanians. Albanians frequently call this area "East Kosovo" or Dukadjin, thus showing their ethno-nationalistic claims over this territory, which they see as a "part of the union of Albanian states." On their end, in the absence of perseverance in accomplishing their political goals and in an attempt to focus attention on ideological aspects and to respond in like fashion to Albanian ethno-nationalism, authorities in Belgrade insist on calling the area the "southern part of Central Serbia."

At the beginning of 2000, Albanian extremists tried to carry military actions from Kosovo over to South and Central Serbia. For this purpose, they wanted to use the security vacuum that occurred after NATO bombing and after the withdrawal of Belgrade's military and police forces from Kosovo. It is a fact that both Milošević's government and NATO, each one for its own reasons, tolerated the strengthening of these Albanian forces.

The new Government established by the winning coalition of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) accepted a programme for peaceful resolution of the crisis and announced the undertaking of counterterrorism measures in January 2001. At the same time and for this purpose, the Government established close cooperation with NATO, i.e., their troops in Kosovo, KFOR, the EU and the USA joined the cooperation in which the active role was given to the OSCE and the UN.

The implementation of the Government of Serbia's programme for the peaceful resolution of the crisis resulted in a number of good results, while at the same time, politically, it was a very delicate and vulnerable process. According to the programme of the DOS government, accepted in January 2001, the following results were accomplished:

- A ceasefire was achieved in November 2001 and the Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja was disarmed.
- The entire region was demilitarized through withdrawal of the military and police forces.
- Internal security was improved and freedom of movement was established. Establishing a local multiethnic police force was an important part of this process, in which the OSCE was especially active.
- Humanitarian aid was provided in food, medicines, cleaning supplies, etc., to 6,110 citizens of Albanian nationality. The payments for damages were handed out in the amount of 920,000 euros and the Government of Serbia invested 1,000,000 euros in the reconstruction of damaged houses and for the temporary accommodations of displaced persons.
- The international community, especially the American administration, provided strong financial support for building infrastructure (roads, schools, health institutions, media, etc). The Government of Serbia invested 8,317,000 euros for the same purpose.
- Initial measures for including Albanians in political decision making in local government were undertaken. This process was strengthened when the local election happened on July 28, 2002. In essence, this election was carried out in accordance to OSCE standards. Most of the seats in the local government were taken by Albanians in Preševo, as well as for the first time in Bujanovac, and by Serbs in Medvedja.

This was also apparent during the local election. This election, namely, was intended to bring Serbian authority to the local communities. The election results, however, were different. Since local Serbs did not want to share power with the Albanians, they organized numerous protests in which they refused to accept the election results. It was expected having in mind the fact that the politicians from the ruling parties of Milošević's regime joined the parties of DOS after October 5th, 2000, thus continuing the old policy of denying the rights of Albanians. In addition to this, the inheritance of fifty years of communist policy and twelve years of Milošević's policy of favoring Serbs was still influencing the situation. For Albanians, who for the first time became the majority within the electoral body of Bujanovac, this place has become a central point of political self-determination, as well as the central point of conflict with Serbs. This question gains in weight especially because of the fact that there are thoughts on both sides of dividing along ethnic lines and exchanging territories. According to such ideas, this territory would be exchanged for a part of North Kosovo. The situation is further complicated by the fact that political instability is caused by the criminalization of the life, economy and politics in this area, which makes it a source of security risks and threats.

At the beginning of January 2005, after the Serbian-Montenegro border guards had killed a sixteen-year-old Albanian, who was crossing the border illegally, ethnic tensions emerged again in South Serbia. About twenty thousand Albanians attended the funeral ceremony. A hundred Albanians broke into the Preševo Town Hall and interrupted the city parliament session at which their representatives had already started demanding the withdrawal of Serbian military forces and the bringing in of 'foreign troops', punishment of the responsible persons and a 'diplomatic' resolution of the Albanian issue in the entire Preševo valley. The investigation that followed confirmed that the border guard from the Serbia-Montenegro armed forces shot at Dasnim Hajrulahu from an observation point that was about 200m away. The Minister of Defence, Prvoslav Davinic, stated that the 'border guard acted within the rules of engagement.' This angered the Albanians further and encouraged them to demand again the demilitarization of this region and its merger with Kosovo.

The latest crisis confirmed that the Preševo valley is an extremely unstable part of Serbia, that the Governments of Serbia and Serbia-Montenegro are not sufficiently ready to react adequately and in a timely fashion, whereas the Albanian extremists are very much ready to utilize every single incident for their own political goals. It is certain that this killing deepened the gap between Belgrade and Albanians from South Serbia and that it revived the fear of resurgent violence between Albanian separatists and Serbian security forces. Because of all of this, the possibility of the escalation of violence in South Serbia remains open. After all, as we know, this region has already been the place of conflict between Albanian guerrillas (Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja) and Serbian security forces from November 2000 to May 2001 when the ceasefire was reached. At that time, the local population

Bujanovac and Medvedja) and Serbian security forces from November 2000 to May 2001 when the ceasefire was reached. At that time, the local population received guarantees that their human rights would be respected and that they would be represented in the local government and police. At the same time, it was announced that broader power would be granted to the local government and that the growth of local industry would be supported.

To make it worse, this is an impoverished region with a gross domestic product 52% smaller than on the state level, which puts it in last place in Serbia in terms of economic development. After decades of industrial growth, a constant decline is currently noted because, in the meantime, parts of or entire big companies (like "Yumko", "Simp", "Koštana"), as well as many family businesses, closed down. One of the consequences is, therefore, increased levels of emigration of the population from this region. According to last year's data, more than thirty thousand people (out of a total of 460,000) moved out of this region over a ten-year period. It is believed, however, that the actual number is twice as much because the official census data include some of the people who have lived abroad for many years.

Local politicians believe that this accelerated emigration can be stopped by opening new companies, building new apartments for young people, and by channelling investment capital towards South Serbia. However, as it is now, the chances of fulfilling these wishes are low since the officials of the Serbian Government are preoccupied with their political fights and exchanges, after which little space is left for the problems of the more remote areas of the country.

In addition to this, we should not neglect the fear of all Albanians uniting – a fear that is exacerbated by maps of "Greater Albania all the way to Nis" that circulate from time to time in the public domestically and internationally. Actually, the Albanian population that constitutes a majority in the Preševo valley has hoped for separation from Belgrade for a long time. In 1992 already, an unofficial referendum was held. At that event, ninety-five percent of the participants voted for uniting with Kosovo. In the event that the exchange of territories happens, local Albanians hope that the Preševo valley will be merged with Kosovo, while the northern areas of Kosovo will be united with central Serbia. Many members of the Albanian movement believe that it is time for the second phase – namely, for the uniting of all Albanians. i.e., Kosovo independence, which is certain in 2005 according to their belief, will create all the necessary preconditions for a single state uniting all Albanians. Every mention of a possible division of Kosovo along ethnic lines increases excitement and activates extremists on both sides, Albanian and Serbian.

It is apparent that Belgrade does not have enough information about the pan-Albanian movement, not to mention that it cannot affect the activities of the movement in South Serbia, Kosovo and western parts of Macedonia. What makes it even more difficult is the fact that this movement has support in Albania and in some political, intelligence and other circles out of the Balkan region. In order to prevent the demands of this movement, Serbia should have a clear state policy and ability to coordinate the activities of its own security forces. However, the reality is the opposite as confirmed by numerous examples of risky moves by some representatives of the Government of Serbia at the beginning of December 2004. Being himself against the withdrawal of military forces out of this area, Nebojša Čović made statements like "the Homeland is tied to the belts of Serbian soldiers" and that "all the Serbs from Kosovo Pomoravlje will leave the region if the military moves out." Slobodan Samardžić, advisor to Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, made statements that fed the delusions about Serbia being able, using the escalation of Albanian extremism and potential conflict in Kosovo, to conduct a military and police intervention there and to split the Kosovo territory. The behaviour of Belgrade authorities regarding the power outages in Kosovo, meaning calls to Serbs not to pay for electricity, as well as calling for public protests and for blocking the roads in December 2004, led many people to conclude that certain circles in Belgrade took part in provoking Albanian extremists in Kosovo. Unusual activities in promoting the book *Kosovo* by Dobrica Cosic, in which a division along ethnic lines is promoted, gave its contribution to the aforementioned impressions.

Belgrade's ability to resolve the problems in South Serbia is also constrained by the lack of full cooperation with the international community, especially with NATO. Belgrade's position is especially worsened because of insufficient cooperation with the International War Crimes Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in The Hague. If it were not the case, it would be possible to expect that the international community, i.e., NATO, would help Belgrade to, for example, prevent the activities of Albanian paramilitary forces from South Serbia in Kosovo and western parts of Macedonia, and vice versa. Independent of this, it should be stressed that the lack of clear messages and decisive actions from the international community feeds the suspicion that some military, security and intelligence structures within NATO use the most extreme Albanians as their weapon for destabilization of the situation in this region. One of the reasons for this may stem from NATO's estimate that Belgrade, even now, threatens the completion of NATO's interests. Another fact that points to this is that from November until the end of December 2004, a few hundred armed Albanian extremists were moving between Kosovo, South Serbia and Macedonia looking for a reason for combat, while the governments of Serbia and Macedonia, as well as KFOR, UNMIK and Kosovo police did not undertake any serious measures to apprehend them.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the current situation in this part of Serbia is more than tense. Consequently, it is very important how the Government of Serbia will react. This is even more so as it is expected that a continued and even intensified political and very entrenched fight will be continued, with each side trying to accomplish as much as possible. The Albanian side is currently trying to discredit negotiators from Belgrade, mostly Čović, in an attempt to accomplish already in this phase its demands for international participants to be included at least as facilitators of the negotiations. While doing this, Albanians are trying to have such facilitators from the pool of people linked to NATO structures or connected to Washington directly. On the other hand, Belgrade is trying to weaken the Albanian position and to conduct the negotiations through existing institutions, such as the Coordination Body. And while Albanian local authorities demand that Belgrade allow deployment of international forces in South Serbia, to withdraw its military and police, and to open new border crossings with Kosovo and Macedonia, Belgrade responds by suggesting the reconstruction of the Coordination Body and with offers to establish a multi-ethnic committee to investigate Hajrulah's death and to create a minority national council. The Albanians rejected this offer as "ridiculous" and reminded Belgrade that its promises for reconstruction of the Coordination Body were not fulfilled over the previous two years. As a matter of fact, because local Albanians were not included, the Coordination Body has not been a representative instrument that can control the situation in South Serbia since 2003.

The key demand by Albanians is "demilitarization", i.e., withdrawal of Serbian security forces. This illustrates that the Albanian movement is focused on a delicate security question, which includes the presence of the Serbia-Montenegro military in this area. Judging by the revival of this request, Albanians, i.e., the municipal government of Preševo, are trying to push the political situation back to March 2001. Namely, in March 2001, these demands were articulated by a group of Albanian extremists, who were members of the armed "Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja". On the other end, there was the so called "Albanian Platform PDP", led by Riza Haljimi, which was a bit more moderate. However, this demand became a general Albanian stance, which was entered into the "Declaration on Demilitarization" on May 21st, 2001.

These demands were rejected by Belgrade (the same way as in 2001), among other reasons also because they are extreme. However, the support for these demands comes from the fact that the crisis resolution process in South Serbia was halted at the end of 2003. It should be added here that during 2004 there were no significant activities of Vojislav Koštunica's government and its Coordination Body. One reason for this interruption was the then current political disagreement between Koštunica and Čović and the unsuccessful attempts of the Government of Serbia to establish a different, more efficient state structure for crisis management in this part of Serbia. Especially noticeable was the teetering of the Serbian Government when considering the ways and the degree of the involvement of Albanians in local governmental bodies. For example, the local election, despite the agreement, was delayed for almost a year and an extraordinary election was called at the end of 2002. This delay, in addition to other things, caused the weakening of the influence of Riza Haljimi's wing. Since then, his PDP has lost its majority in the municipal parliaments of Preševo and Bujanovac, although Haljimi was elected to be the mayor of Preševo. Thanks to this, the armed extremists from 2001 took over the local government in the year 2002. At the same time, the PDP was accused of not

Preševo. Thanks to this, the armed extremists from 2001 took over the local government in the year 2002. At the same time, the PDP was accused of not being able to solve social and economic problems. It was also accused that, even though it played a significant role in peace negotiations between Belgrade and the international community in 2001, it had failed to protect the interests of Albanians. The extremists' accusations against the PDP were further supported by the delay in the implementing of the Serbian Government's Plan (the so-called Čović Plan from 2001) for the resolution of the crisis in South Serbia. At the time, this Plan was a good example of the political, security, economic and social reaction to the crisis. However, it lost steam when it reached its third phase – the institution building phase. In addition, the Parliament of Serbia has not received the report on the Plan's implementation until now, even though the deadline for the plan's implementation expired in 2004. Furthermore, the said plan has not been amended even though the situation changed noticeably. Therefore, revived and expanded demands by Albanians can become productive if uncoordinated reactions and steps by the Government in Belgrade are continued. Its lack of unified political stance extends to the adequate reaction time of the Serbian Government to new security provocations, while giving enough time to Albanians to acquire support for their requirements from the international public, as well as from some NATO structures.

For Belgrade to be able to manage this crisis effectively, it is necessary to settle first the political conflict within the political leadership of Serbia. It is necessary, then, for the government in Belgrade to publish, as soon as possible, the results of the investigation into the death of the young Albanian. The condition for this is that the investigation will be carried out professionally and without mystifications that are common in Serbia. In other words, it is necessary that Serbian authorities act wisely and politically before the fire breaks out (again). In order to pre-empt Albanian extremists, they should take the initiative to internationalize, for example, the problem and through their own initiative, include the OSCE in calming down the situation in South Serbia. Compared with the crisis in South Serbia in 2001, it is noticeable that the international organizations are less engaged than they were then. This is especially true for the OSCE, whose responsibility is the strengthening of political institutions and ensuring Albanian participation in elections; however, it is known that Albanians from South Serbia have boycotted all the presidential, as well as the state elections since 2000. The OSCE's engagement was insufficient in including Albanians in the judicial system. The government of Serbia on its end contributes to this situation by believing that it can resolve the problems on its own, that it can use the latest crisis to include Albanians into the Coordination Centre and to apply the State Union's law on minorities, i.e., to create a national council for them. The impression is that Belgrade acts as if it has ample time available. However, there is no such time left considering the quite evident escalation of tensions, even violence, in nearby Kosovo. It would be very important for Belgrade, and also for the stability of the region, to conclude the political negotiations in South Serbia within a month.

Namely, since Albanians don't want to accept the proposals of Serbian authorities, Belgrade should initiate on its own cooperation with the international community. It would be possible, in such an arrangement, before anything else, to demand that the OSCE mission in Serbia-Montenegro become involved in resolving the problems of political participation of Albanians in state institutions and in the political life of Serbia. Also, closer cooperation (according to the model implemented in resolving the armed conflict in 2001) between the Serbian Government and NATO, i.e., KFOR, in consultations and exchange of information. The impression is that Belgrade's position, if it further delays doing this, will be even less favourable not only in South Serbia but it will also decrease the chances for any participation in managing and resolving the Kosovo crisis.

Considering that it is evident that the crisis in South Serbia will continue and that possible new armed provocations are not excluded, it is necessary that the authorities in Serbia undertake, as soon as possible, additional measures for establishing trust: strengthening the multi-ethnic police, reforming of local media, inclusion of Albanian representatives (also, in the Coordination Body), raising the level of citizen initiatives, and realizing the plans for socio-economic revival of the local communities and improvement of the economic status of the population in this region.

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